

50 Friendly Fire - 1855 style: The Enquiry

50 [TWC 34(1) p35 2016]

by Douglas Austin, Mike Hinton, Tony James and Tony Margrave

Previous notes by Michael Morris, Tony James and Douglas Austin in this journal have told the sad story of the death of Surgeon Edward Le Blanc of the 9th Foot - shot by a French sentry on Saturday, 17th March, 1855. A formal enquiry was immediately put in hand and took place on Wednesday, 21st March.

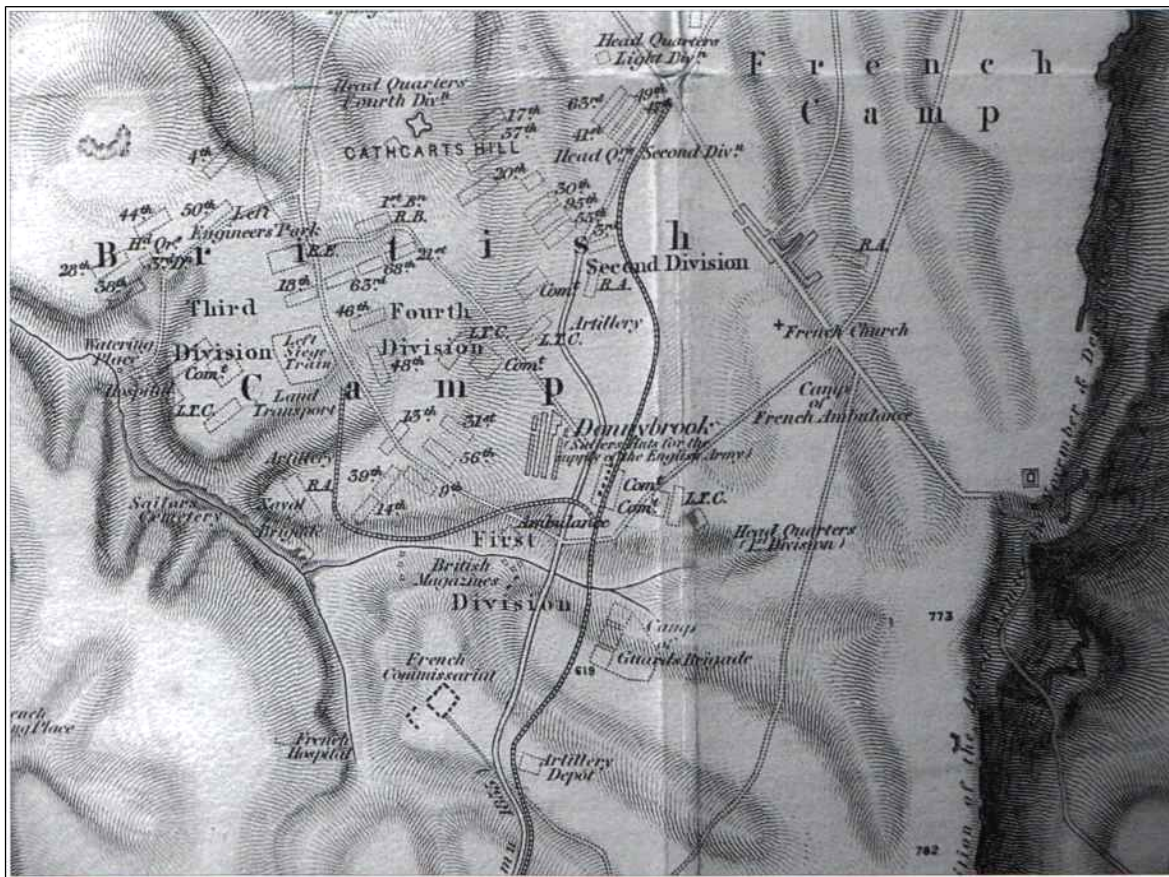
Details about Surgeon Le Blanc, given in Tony Margrave's *Officers List* (May 2016), read as follows:-

Le Blanc, Edward (1815-55), Surgn, 9th Foot, Eldest son of William Le Blanc. F/a Asst Surgn, May 21, 1841; Surgn, 2 Cl, Feb 27, 1852. To Staff, May 21, 1841; 38th Foot, Aug 17, 1841; Staff, Feb 27, 1852; 9th Foot, Aug 15, 1854. Cr War, Jan 8, 1855, arr, Cr. Killed, March 17, 1855, aged 39. Surgeon of the 9th Regiment, [killed] on the 17th March, before Sebastopol. He was coming home after dark, and got outside the French lines on the right of the English. He was challenged by a sentry, and either did not hear or understand what the man said. The Frenchman challenged again; and receiving no satisfactory reply, shot the unfortunate officer dead on the spot. Mr. Leblanc was much beloved in the regiment. (AMJ Obit.). Obit. AMJ, April 6, 1855 & Lancet (1855).

Born in Hendon, Middlesex as the younger son of William Le Blanc, little else is known of Le Blanc's early life and qualifications but his first Army appointment, when he was ca. 26 years old, was as an Assistant Surgeon (Staff) in May, 1841. He transferred to the 38th (1st Staffordshire) Foot in August, 1841. This distinguished regiment served in several overseas locations. In September, 1840, the 38th embarked for Zante, also known as Zakynthos (the most southerly of the Ionian Islands, then a British protectorate) and in March 1843, proceeded to Gibraltar. In November, 1845 and January, 1846, it was removed to Jamaica and to Halifax, Nova Scotia in April and May, 1848. Early in 1848, a detachment of 300 troops, including Asst.-Surgeon Le Blanc, was sent to Nicaragua. *Hart's List for 1849* has it:- "38th Foot - Lieut Hugonin and Asst.-Surgeon Le Blanc served with a detachment of the 38th Regiment in cooperation with a Naval expedition under Captain Lock in the ascent, in boats, of the river St. Juan de Nicaragua, central America, in 1848, including the assault and capture of the port of Serapaqui, and surrender of the Forts of Castello Viejo and St. Carlos." (The British Army's presence and actions in Nicaragua, in competition with the USA and Louis Napoleon's France, relate to the long-held wish to establish a Nicaraguan Canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific involving the Mosquito (Miskito) coast. The project sports a chaotic history up to the present day, when a vast Chinese-funded endeavour has only very recently been put on hold.)

The regiment eventually returned from Nova Scotia and landed at Portsmouth on the 26th of August, 1851. During the 24th-26th of April, 1854, the 38th Foot embarked for the Crimea. Le Blanc transferred to the 9th (East Norfolk) Foot in August, 1854. That regiment was engaged at the Alma on the 20th September. A map - shown below - from the "*Siege of Sebastopol : Engineers Operations*" by Elphinstone and Jones (1858) shows the camp of the 9th Foot, in Sir Richard England's 3rd Division, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile due south of Cathcart's Hill and $\frac{1}{4}$ mile west of the "Donnybrook" sutlers huts, with the Ambulance (where Le Blanc worked?) close by. The camp of the 57th Foot was ca. 200 yards to the east of Cathcart's hill. Le Blanc's wanderings started before 8.30 pm and led him to the 57th Foot in the trenches by about 10 p.m. (Civil twilight occurred at 7.23 pm with moonset (waning crescent) at 6.03 pm - a very dark night.) The French 18th Regiment de Ligne was ca. 3 miles off to the north-west. Canrobert informed Raglan (in French) "...Last night, while the troops were perpetually on the alert, an English officer presented himself before the line of the

18th Regiment, established near the watch-tower [*clocheton* = *pinnacle tower/belfry*] behind our trenches of the left attack. Although summoned three times by the *qui vive* the officer did not reply; the sentinel fired, and he was killed on the spot..." The "Maison du Clocheton" is clearly named on Blondel's 1854 map - behind the trenches of the French left attack - and its position is indicated on the 1858 map.



Adjutant-General James Estcourt's diary includes:- "March 17. Saturday A very cold day. Heavy musquetry firing began about 7 oclock PM and continued for near two hours. We heard the 3d Division "Turn out" and the "Double Quick". So we mounted, and went to Ld Raglan's house to see what he meant to do. Steele Calthorpe and Curzon were all sent out to enquire the matter. Also Barnston D.A.Q.M.G. He returned first after a long time having been to the Picquet House in front of the Light Division. He reported that the firing was all in front of the French on the right. That we had not fired a shot. What more had happened was not known. All the Divisions were under arms. The firing sounded to me like an attack on our extreme left up the ravine between our left and the French right on their left attack. So deceived may one be at night. As it turned out it was beyond our right."

Quarter-Master-General Richard Airey's diary for the same day includes:- "...A very heavy fire began at about 8½ oclock and continued, with more or less vigour until about 11. There were very few heavy guns fired during the night, but the musquetry only ceased at intervals for a few moments and was renewed each time with greater rapidity. The fire was caused by an attack of the French on some Russian rifle-pits in front of the Mamelon by which they suffered considerably and did not retain possession of them...". Neither Estcourt nor Airey mention Le Blanc or the subsequent Enquiry, but those diary entries certainly confirm "alarms and excursions" sufficient to send Le Blanc out to see what was going on.

John Shepherd, "*Crimean Doctors: A History of the British Medical Services in the Crimean War. Vol. 2*" (Liverpool University Press, 1991) records on p 328 that 'Staff-Surgeon Edward Le Blanc, surgeon to the 9th Regiment, was accidentally killed on 17th March. Le Blanc was short-sighted and rather deaf. A night alarm had been raised and when he left his tent to investigate he strayed into an adjacent French camp. Challenged by a sentry, he failed to reply and was shot through the head. Raglan convened a Board to investigate the affair and no blame was attached to the sentry.'

D. A. Reid, "*Memories of the Crimea War*", 1911, p. 33 states "The shots of the Russians were not the only dangers to which we were exposed. On March 17th, St Patrick's Day, Surgeon Le Blanc of the 9th Regiment, returning to camp from a visit to a friend, after dark, got near the French lines and was challenged by a sentry with the usual *qui va la?* Not knowing the pass-word he made no reply. The sentry repeated the challenge with the same result. He then, carrying out his orders, raised his rifle and shot the Doctor dead. It was not safe to wander far away from one's own camp at night at this period, when every one was on the alert, and when it was very easy to lose one's way, all the camps being so much alike."

The immediate upshot of Le Blanc's absence was the following correspondence, now held in WO 28/193:-

Camp, March 18 1855

To: Brigade Major, 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division

Sir,

With reference to the letter from the Asst Adjt General herewith returned I regret to report from the Maj. Gen. Com. the Brigade that it has been just brought to my attention that Surgeon Le Blanc of the Regt under my command left his tent at about 8 o'clock last evening without giving any instructions to his servant and has not since been heard of. Enquiry has in vain been made amongst the Regts in which he was known to have friends; and as he was a man of very regular habits but extremely short sighted, I much fear that his absence may have been caused by some untoward accident.

I have the honour to be

Yr most obdt Serv

A. Borton, Lt Col, 9th Regt

Camp, March 17 1855 (March 18th?)

To: Brigade Major, 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division

Sir,

With reference to my report, just forwarded, relative to the absence of Surgeon le Blanc of the 9 Regt I grieve to state that 2 sailors have just brought the intelligence of his having been shot dead by a French sentinel in front of the camp on our left. I have sent over an officer with a party to make further enquiries which shall be duly reported to Major General.

I have the honour to be Sir

Yr most obdt Serv

A. Borton, Lt Col, 9th Regt

Annotated: Forwarded - Instructions are requested relative to this unfortunate affair. I have not ordered a court of inquiry as I thought it possible that other than a regimental board to investigate the circumstances might be deemed expedient.

Signed: Wm Eyre, Maj. Gen.

Camp, 18 March 1855

My dear Estcourt

We can as yet give no particulars as to this poor Surgeons death but probably in the returns of the persons sent by the Commanding Officer of the 9th something may transpire. Meantime I enclose the reports on the subject which I have received and if other steps are deemed desirable to be adopted by us you will perhaps communicate Lord Raglan's wishes thereon. Possibly an enquiry through the French authorities into the manner in which Mr Le Blanc lost his life wd be desirable.

Yours truly,
R. England

The following text of the local formal enquiry is held in The National Archive, KEW, under W028/181 (Proceedings of Courts Martial). Raglan's transmission of it to Lord Panmure is held in W028/372: -

Proceedings of a Board of Officers assembled to enquire into the causes that led to the death of Surgeon Edward Le Blanc, 9th Regiment of Foot.

Headquarters of the 1st French Corps
Before Sevastopol 21st March 1855

Members

Lieut Col. Reille	Etat-Major		Major Claremont	Special Service
Major Panis	18th Regt.		Capt. Hawes	9th Regt.
Captain L'Empreur	18th Regt.		Capt White	89th Regt.

1st Witness. Private Ragiane 18th Regiment of French Infantry of the Line states as follows: - I was on Sentry in front of the Regiment to which I belong on the night of the 17th Instant, about midnight I saw a person coming towards me whom I challenged two or three times, a sort of low unintelligible answer was made which I could not understand. I then made signs with my hand to the person to go either to the right or left; the person kept coming on me. I then took the stopper out of my firelock and knocked the butt end on the ground to shew I was going to fire, and on the person still coming on, I did fire at about six paces distance; previous to firing I warned that I was going to do so. I was an advanced Sentry about 150 yards in front of the Regiment. It was so dark that I could hardly distinguish the dress of the person I fired at, but still as he got closer it appeared to me that he was not in uniform.

2nd Witness. Major Panis 18th Regiment of French Infantry of the Line commands the Battalion to which 1st Witness belongs. He states as follows: - The Battalion which I command has no other troops in front of it, at least not in the spot where Private Ragiane was an advanced Sentry, about 100 yards from the nearest sentries, and 150 yards from the front of the Regiment. The orders to Sentries are to fire upon people who do not answer their Challenge.

3rd Witness. Sergeant Defils 18th Regiment of French Infantry of the Line states as follows: - I commanded the Guard of which 1st Witness was one on the Night of the 17th Instant, he was posted on Sentry in front of the Regiment from 10 to 12 oClock P.M., at about 12 o'Clock I was told a shot had been fired. I went out to see what had happened and met the Adjutant Major of the Regiment, who sent me for a Doctor.

4th Witness. Captain Chafoton, Adjutant Major of the 18th Regiment of French Infantry of the Line states as follows: - On the night of the 17th Instant at about 12 oClock, I was told that a shot had been fired and a Man hit by one of our Sentries. I immediately went to the spot when I saw on the ground what I took at first to be a Russian Officer owing to the long coat but on a nearer inspection I saw it must be an English Officer from the ornament in the Cap. Life was already quite extinct, and I ordered a litter to be brought to convey the body to the Hospital. I found the Sentry quite calm, and he said that he had only fired after having challenged three times and not having been answered, and having also warned that he was going to fire.

5th Witness. Assistant Surgeon Remy of the 18th Regiment of French Infantry of the Line states as follows: - On the night of the 17th Instant at about 12 oClock I was sent for to see a person who had been shot by one of our Sentries, I found it was an English Officer who had received the wound from evidently a very near shot, the ball had entered the left eye, had gone through the brain, and had gone out of the back part of the head: Life was quite extinct. An Inventory of everything found on the deceased was forwarded to the French Head Quarters and thence to the English Head Quarters; all letters found were directed to Surgeon Edward Le Blanc 9th Regiment.

6th Witness. Private Robert Eddy 9th Regiment, Batman to the deceased, states as follows: - the last time I saw Surgeon Le Blanc was on the night of the 17th Inst at about ¼ to 8 oClock, there was a good deal of firing going on and I suppose Mr. Le Blanc went out to see what was the matter, for on my returning to his tent at about ½ past 8, he was not there, the candle was burning, and the book he had been reading was still open on the table. I saw his body brought back on the afternoon of the 18th Instant. I had taken a Cup of Coffee to him at ¼ to 8, and found it partly untouched when I returned.

7th Witness. Lieutenant Ashwin 57th Regiment states as follows: -I was on duty in the trenches in the first parallel on the extreme right of our left attack, at about 10 oClock on the night of the 17th Instant; I heard a person coming towards me and challenged, he did not take any notice either then, or on my repeating the challenge, but kept coming towards the trench; I called the Sergeant and then tried to find out who he was, his manner was confused and embarrassed, but he stated he was an Officer of the 9th Regiment, that he had come out to look at the firing, had lost his way, and that he wished to have the road to the 3rd Division pointed out to him.

8th Witness. Assistant Surgeon Johnston 9th Regt. states as follows: - I knew the deceased to be very short sighted and to have a hesitation in his speech, and he was quite unacquainted with the different localities of the Camp.

Opinion

The Board having carefully considered the evidence on record, are of opinion that the death of Surgeon Le Blanc 9th Regiment is the result of an unfortunate accident, but that no blame can be attached to the French Sentry who was the cause of it.

Signed
LCol Reille

Signed
E.S.Claremont

Major
Special Service

Signed
Le Commt. De Panis

Signed
G.H.Hawes

Capt
9th Regiment

Signed
Captain L'Empreur

Signed
Hans W. White

Capt
89th Foot

Summary:- We conclude that, on a very dark and noisy night, Le Blanc (reportedly short-sighted and deaf) wandered to the 57th Foot position in the trenches and then - somehow - found his way west to the French lines, where he met his death. We must presume that Private Ragiane of the 18th Regiment of French Infantry of the Line was commended for doing his duty - and for good shooting...



The Crimean War Medal Roll lists Edward Le Blanc as being entitled to the British Medal with the Sebastopol clasp, but not with the Alma clasp - although the 9th Foot was engaged there. Because he was unmarried, his impressed medal - which is now owned by Tony James - may have been preserved in the family of Arthur, his older brother. Mike Hinton has found that a memorial to Edward Le Blanc was later placed in the Cathcart's Hill cemetery, which was long since almost obliterated.